

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE
BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF MS. KIT BIGELOW, DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF
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before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL
OPERATIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE, U.S. HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES, JUNE 30, 2006

My name is Kit Bigelow, director of the Office of External Affairs of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. We would like to thank the House Committee on International Relations' Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Relations for asking us to testify today about the situations of the Bahá'í communities in Iran and Egypt.

We would like to take this opportunity also to thank Congress for its longtime support of Iran's beleaguered Bahá'í community. In 1982, 1984 and 1988 there were hearings on the persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís. Since 1982, Congress has passed eight concurrent resolutions calling for the emancipation of that Bahá'í community. Representatives Kirk and Lantos have just introduced H.Con.Res. 415, once again condemning the deliberate mistreatment of the Bahá'ís in Iran. We hope as many Members as possible will become cosponsors. We wish to express our particular gratitude to Congressman Smith, who has cosponsored six of those resolutions and has been a main supporter in Congress' efforts to assist the Iranian Bahá'í community.

Iran has been designated a "Country of Particular Concern" by the U.S. Government for its "egregious violations of religious freedom." Egypt is on the Watch List of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The Bahá'í communities in Egypt and Iran are both threatened by deliberate, long-term and well-documented government strategies dedicated to their eventual destruction. In both cases, the threats have recently become more dire, and the situations more urgent.

Persecution in Iran

In Iran, where the Bahá'í Faith began in the 19th century, Bahá'ís constitute the largest religious minority. Some 300,000-350,000 Bahá'ís live in all regions of the country. However, the Bahá'í

Faith is not recognized as a legitimate religion: the Islamic regime regards it as apostasy and as a conspiracy. As “unprotected infidels,” Bahá’ís have no legal rights.

By order of the Iranian Government, Bahá’ís are not permitted to elect leaders, and they have been barred from institutions of higher education since 1980. According to Iranian law, Bahá’í blood can be spilled with impunity. They are not allowed to worship collectively. Bahá’ís are also denied jobs and pensions: more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university posts since 1979. All cemeteries, holy places and community properties were seized soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Many properties have been destroyed, and none have been returned. The right of Bahá’ís to inherit is denied. Since 1996, Bahá’ís have been strictly forbidden to seek probate. In the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution, more than 200 Bahá’ís were killed or summarily executed, and thousands more were jailed.

The elimination of the Bahá’í community of Iran is explicit government policy. A secret Iranian Government document published by the U.N. Human Rights Commission in 1993 outlines the official strategy to suppress the Bahá’í community. Written by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, this document dated February 25, 1991, set forth specific guidelines for dealing with Bahá’ís so that “their progress and development are blocked.”

During the past two years, there has been an increase in arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, the destruction of historic religious sites, defamation campaigns in government-sponsored media, and other pressures of a type not experienced since the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution. In 2005, the Iranian Government initiated a new wave of assaults, home raids, harassment and detentions. More than 120 Bahá’ís are awaiting trial after having been imprisoned, most of them without having been charged. However, one charge has been “creating anxiety in the minds of the public and those of the Iranian officials.” In December 2005, 59-year-old Mr. Zabihollah Mahrami died of unknown causes after 10 years imprisonment on charges of apostasy. Bahá’ís have been barred from institutions of higher education since 1980. Despite assurances by the Iranian Government that Bahá’ís would be able to attend university in 2005, authorities have continued to exclude Bahá’ís from attending university due to their religion. From October 2005 to the present, the government-sponsored newspaper, *Kayhan*, has been running a campaign of vilification and distortion on the Bahá’í Faith to arouse public antipathy against the Bahá’ís. In 2004 and 2005, two important Bahá’í holy places were destroyed and a cemetery was desecrated.

One of the most ominous signs of the government’s intentions was exposed on March 20, 2006. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief revealed the existence of a confidential letter from the Command Headquarters of Iran’s Armed Forces to several Iranian government agencies. The letter stated that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had instructed the Command Headquarters to identify persons who adhere to the Bahá’í Faith and to monitor their activities. The letter went on to order the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard and the Police Force to collect, in a highly confidential manner, any and all information about members of the Bahá’í Faith. The White House subsequently expressed its concern for the “worsening” situation of the Bahá’ís in Iran. The Anti-Defamation League

called the Iranian Government's actions "reminiscent of the steps taken against Jews in Europe and a dangerous step toward the institution of Nuremberg-type laws."

On May 19, 2006, 54 Bahá'ís were arrested in the city of Shiraz while they were engaged in humanitarian service with underprivileged children. Most of the Bahá'ís who were arrested were young people. It was one of the largest mass arrests of Bahá'ís since the 1980s. On that same day, the houses of six of those arrested were raided. Notebooks, computers, books and documents were confiscated. The Bahá'ís who were arrested were later released, but all await trial.

Persecution in Egypt

The most urgent issue that faces the Bahá'í community in Egypt is the Government's decision to require all of its citizens to obtain mandatory identification cards. At present, Bahá'ís are not legally permitted to obtain these cards.

The Bahá'í community in Egypt traces its roots to the 1860s. The first National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt, the Bahá'í national governing body, was elected in 1924, and legally incorporated in 1934.

In 1925, the Supreme Religious Court of Cairo annulled the marriage between a Bahá'í man and a Muslim woman on the grounds that the Bahá'í Faith was a "heresy." The court also acknowledged that the Bahá'í Faith was "a new religion, [and] entirely independent." This was the first official recognition of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion in the Muslim world.

In 1960, President Nasser signed Presidential Decree 263 banning Bahá'í activities. The ban dissolved "all Bahá'í Assemblies and Centers." "Individuals, bodies and institutions" were forbidden from engaging "in any activity." All Bahá'í properties, including the national headquarters building, the libraries, and cemeteries, as well as all Bahá'í funds and assets were confiscated. These properties and assets have never been returned. The ban on Bahá'í organization and activities remains law today.

In keeping with the Bahá'í principle of obedience to government, the Bahá'ís of Egypt immediately disbanded their religious institutions in 1960. The Government promised that individuals would remain free to practice their religion, and Bahá'ís accordingly replaced community services with worship by individuals and families. Nevertheless, they have faced several episodes of arrests, detentions, and imprisonment, the most recent being in 2001. Bahá'ís remain under constant police surveillance. Their homes are periodically searched. Bahá'í literature is taken and destroyed.

Over the last several decades, the Egyptian Bahá'í community has diminished in size by 90 percent, to 500 people.

Along with Christianity and Judaism, the Bahá'í Faith has been regularly vilified and misrepresented in the Egyptian media. The attacks in the media appear designed to inspire popular hostility against the Bahá'ís. Recurring themes are that Bahá'ís are spies of foreign

powers and that they indulge in immoral activities. These calumnies have no basis in fact, but for many Egyptians this is the only information about the Bahá'í Faith they have ever encountered.

The Bahá'í community of Egypt has also faced persecution and harassment from the religious orthodoxy in Egypt. Over the years, the Bahá'í Faith has been the subject of numerous “fatwas” that deride it as a heresy and accuse its followers of apostasy, a charge which is punishable by death under traditional Islamic law. Most recently, on December 15, 2003, a fatwa by the Islamic Research Academy of Al-Azhar University described the Bahá'í Faith as “a lethal spiritual epidemic in the fight against which the state must mobilize all its contingencies to annihilate it.” The statement goes on to demand: “those [Bahá'ís] who have committed criminal acts against Islam and our country must disappear from life and not be allowed to announce their deviation from Islam.”

The crisis that immediately confronts the Egyptian Bahá'ís concerns the identification cards that must be obtained by each Egyptian citizen by the end of 2006. The cards must be presented for any type of government service, such as medical care in a public hospital or processing for a property title or deed. They are required to obtain employment, education or banking services. They are needed to pass through police checkpoints, and individuals without cards are deprived of their freedom of movement.

These identification cards require citizens to state their religious affiliation. The current system allows for only one of the three recognized religions of Egypt to be entered: Islam, Christianity, or Judaism.

In the past, Bahá'ís had been permitted to leave the religious affiliation space blank, or to make a dash, or to write “other.” A few were even permitted to list “Bahá'í.” Now only one of the three recognized religions can be entered.

The Bahá'ís in Egypt have approached their government on numerous occasions to plead for a change in the identification card. Their requests for a change have been repeatedly denied.

We wish to emphasize that the Bahá'ís of Egypt are not asking for special treatment. They wish to follow the regulations of their government. Bahá'ís are willing to continue to write a dash, or leave the religious affiliation space blank. It is evident that the challenges facing the Bahá'ís could be faced by any Egyptian citizen who also is not a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew.

What the Egyptian Bahá'ís are not able to do is to lie to their government by claiming to be members of a religion they are not—both because it is a matter of religious principle to them and because they do not wish to perpetrate a fraud against their government.

On April 4, 2006, an Egyptian Administrative Court found that Bahá'ís have the right to obtain government-issued documents that state their religion as Bahá'í. Notably, the court found that Bahá'ís have a right to accurate documents regardless of whether or not the government recognizes the legitimacy of their religion for “open practice.” The Ministry of the Interior has appealed that ruling. The Ministry of Justice has requested the Council of Islamic Studies at Al-

Azhar to provide its opinion on the subject of the legitimacy of the Bahá'í religion. On May 15, the Supreme Administrative Court suspended implementation of the lower court ruling pending the Government's appeal. On June 19, that same court postponed the appeal hearing until September 16, 2006.

Moving forward

In Egypt, the ultimate hope of the Bahá'í community is the rescinding or nullification of Presidential Decree 263—lifting the ban on their Faith. The Egyptian Government is signatory to several international human rights treaties, including the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees religious freedom. Our urgent plea is for the Egyptian Government to allow all of its citizens, including the Bahá'ís, to be treated as equal. The April 4 Administrative Court ruling provided a positive first step toward reaching that goal. We hope that the Supreme Administrative Court upholds on appeal the lower court's ruling.

In 1996, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief recommended actions that the Iranian Government could take toward the eventual emancipation of the Bahá'í community. They were: allowing full access to education and employment; providing the right to citizenship, burials, freedom of movement, and security of the person; allowing Bahá'ís to reestablish their banned administrative institutions; and nondiscrimination against the Bahá'ís and the restoration of Bahá'í community properties. None of these steps has yet been implemented. Given the recent crackdown on the largest religious minority in that country, we appeal once again to the Iranian Government to stop arresting and harassing Bahá'ís, not to implement its plan to record the names and monitor the activities of all Bahá'ís, and to permit Bahá'ís to practice their religion in complete freedom.

Before we conclude, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the various agencies of the U.S. Government--the White House, the State Department, the Congress, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom--for speaking out in the U.S. and internationally at the U.N. about the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran and Egypt. We believe that a government's repressive policies and actions must not be allowed to remain hidden. We thank Senators Reid and Brownback and Congressmen Kirk and Lantos, along with the many co-sponsors who are supporting the current Congressional resolutions calling for the emancipation of the Bahá'ís in Iran. We hope Congress will continue to voice its concern and will work with Parliamentarians worldwide for the religious freedom of all people. The Bahá'ís of the U.S. thank Congress for affirming the right of the long-suffering Bahá'ís in Iran and Egypt to practice freely their religion.